Remarks in a Roundtable Discussion on the Future of South Africa in Johannesburg

March 28, 1998

The President. Let me first just thank all of you for taking the time to come and meet with Hillary and me. We've had a fascinating trip to Africa and a wonderful 3 days in South Africa, but I didn't want to leave the country without having the chance to have kind of an informal conversation with young people that are making the future of this country. And I want you to say to us whatever you'd like to say, but I'm especially interested in what you see are the main challenges today, what you think the United States and others could do to be helpful.

The story of the liberation of South Africa is a fabulous story. As I said last night in my toast to Mr. Mandela, one of our most eloquent political leaders in America said that in democracies, campaigns are conducted in poetry, but government is conducted in prose. And there is always a lot of hard work that has to be done. And I think it's very important that your generation maintain its optimism and energy, and it's important that the rest of us continue to make a constructive contribution to your efforts.

So I basically just want to listen today and hear what you have to say. And if you have any questions for us, I'll be glad to answer them, but I want to learn more about your take on your country and your future.

Hillary, do you want to say anything?

Hillary Clinton. No, I would be happy just to start.

[*At this point, Friendly Twala, a Ministry of Education district education coordinator specializing in guidance and career orientation, described his background and experience in mediation and conflict resolution. Graeme Simpson, director, Center for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, described his work and suggested that violent crime was perhaps the greatest threat to democracy and human rights in South Africa.*]

Mrs. Clinton. Why don't we go around and hear from everybody briefly first, and then perhaps have a conversation about some of those issues?

[*Bongi Mkhabela, Director of Projects and Programs in the office of Deputy President Thabo Mbeki, stressed the need for integration of youth issues into national policy and for training of the next generation of leaders. Vasu Gounden, director, African Center for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes, suggested sustainable aid and the African Crisis Response Initiative as discussion topics and praised the Entebbe Summit communique positions on democracy and civil society. Bongani Linda, arts manager, Center for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, described his work with prisoners and youth and suggested that cultural exchanges could have a positive impact on youth in communities such as Soweto. Kumi Naidoo, executive director, South African National NGO Coalition (SANGOCO), urged that the U.S. Agency for International Development remain involved in South Africa beyond the transitional period ending in 2002 and provide increased assistance to the nongovernmental sector. Nicola Galombik, director of educational television, South African Broadcasting Corporation, emphasized the importance of information and technology to bridge the cultural and interpersonal divisions of apartheid by carrying the messages and faces of all South Africans. Chris Landsberg introduced himself as incoming head of the foreign policy program at the Center for Policy Studies in South Africa, and referred to the fact that both he and Mr. Naidoo had studied at Oxford in the United Kingdom.*]

The President. There are days when I wish we could all go back. [*Laughter*]

[*Mr. Landsberg stated that his country faced challenges in addressing the needs and concerns of a formerly disenfranchised majority while incorporating minorities in its society; avoiding a disconnect between elite society and rural society and the poor; generating economic growth and encouraging democracy in Africa; and encouraging its private sector to find solutions for social problems. He expressed his hope that partnership with the United States would have a positive impact.*]

The President. Thank you.

Hillary, do you want to say anything?

[*Mrs. Clinton agreed that there were challenges to democracies everywhere, at all stages of their development. She asked about coordinated efforts in South Africa to try to replace the enthusiasm for liberation and freedom with a long-term commitment to a stable, functioning democracy with full participation. A participant explained that the new National Development Agency provided financing to grassroots organizations and acted as a policy forum reporting to the Parliament. Another participant suggested that people who had withdrawn from public life after the end of apartheid might be brought back into a struggle to end poverty. He also stated that businesses should offer more than monetary contributions to nongovernmental organizations.*]

The President. Let me ask a question, a followup question that may seem almost simple-minded to you, but I think the answer—whatever answer you give will give me some indication about where the conversation should go. Why has the crime rate gone up so much in the last 4 years? Anybody can take it.

[*A participant suggested the crime levels had previously been under-reported, but that gangs now offered youth the same type of subcultural identity as anti-apartheid political parties had, with the added benefit of wealth potential. He defined the problem as one of identity, culture, economics, and education, and said the government had to confront its lack of technical capacity to implement its policy.*]

The President. I agree with that. Anybody else want to say anything about the causes of crime?

[*A participant stressed the need for career guidance in schools so that more people would be prepared for employment, and for more aid to education from NGO's as well as the government. Another participant reiterated that crime figures were still unreliable and noted the involvement of international organized crime. A participant then stated that disadvantaged communities had heightened expectations, unemployment was a major problem, and crime levels discouraged foreign investment.*]

The President. Let me just observe, I don't think it is an insurmountable problem, and I think it would be certainly not grounds for withdrawal of foreign investment.

But let me tell you a story about a different society. I went to Riga, Latvia—Hillary and I did—a few years ago, and the last of the Russian troops—the former Soviet Union—Russian troops withdrew from the Baltics. And Riga is the largest northernmost port in the world, I think. There are about a million people there. So the Baltic States are finally free of Communist domination after decades. And we sit there, and we're having this conversation like you and I are. We're having—these three Baltic Presidents—and I ask them, what would they like me to do—is to open an FBI office in Riga.

One of the most popular things we did was to open an FBI office in Moscow. Why? Because they had this totalitarian, control-oriented society, and when they ripped it away and substituted a democracy for it, nature abhors a vacuum. And then besides that, there were a lot of unemployed people who had positions in the apparatus. And they were dealing with huge amounts of transnational crime, the kind of thing you talked about earlier.

Same thing happens at the local level; one of you mentioned this. There is a pretty even distribution of international—and energy and ambition in this world, whether it's out there on that play yard or in the wealthiest neighborhood in the United States. And nature abhors a vacuum. And we found—I'll never forget, once I was in Los Angeles when the gang problem there was particularly intense several years ago, and there was a three-page interview with a 17-year-old gang leader. And I read this; I said, "My God, this guy is a genius. Why did we lose this young man? He's a genius." And when he was asked, "Well, what are you going to do when you're 25," he said, "I don't expect to be alive."

I think all this goes back to what you were saying at first, those of you who worked in the NGO community, those of you that are worried about the institutions of civil society. I think that for so long it was obvious what the big problem was here, and you had to deal with the big problem first. I mean, if you hadn't done that, you couldn't go on to other things. And it was easy to organize the emotions and the energies and the gifts of people toward that, whether they were young or older. But then after that, you're left with a freer government, a more open system, a more open society, but you still don't have all this infrastructure. And

there is no simple answer, but I think that basically you have to have both more leaders and more structures.

I think about—for example, in the United States, I just got a report right before I left here attempting to analyze the reasons for the big drop in crime in America in the last 5 years. And I may miss the numbers, but this is roughly accurate, because I read it in a hurry. Roughly, the people who did this research concluded that about 35 percent of the drop was due to an improving economy: more people had jobs, and the gains of property crime and the risk of getting caught were not so important. And a little less than that was due to improved policing—more police officers and rooting them more closely in the community, so that they worked with children and with families and with block leaders to keep things from happening in the first place—and the rest of it due to a whole amalgam of factors related to keeping mostly young people out of trouble in the first place, giving them other things to do. The best example of structure I've seen since I got up this morning is all those kids in their uniforms out there singing the song to me when I got out. But in America we have the Boys Clubs, the Girls Clubs, the YMCA, and all of those organizations, the scouting movement.

Those of us in government sometimes tend to be very almost egocentric, and we forget what real people do with their time all day every day, from the time they get up in the morning until they go to bed at night. And most real people don't have all that much contact with us. We fund the schools and the police officers driving around and other things. So I think that our aid programs and a lot of our partnerships ought to be focused on helping you develop more leaders and more structures.

Hillary took me the first day we were in South Africa—we got in in the middle of the night, and she made me get up early the next day because she said, "You've got to go back to this housing project that I visited that's outside of Cape Town"—about, I don't know, 30 kilometers outside of Cape Town, to meet this woman who was in charge of this community-based self-help housing project where poor people were building their own homes. And you have to contribute to the membership of the organization, so there was a remarkable amount of organization in this very poor community and a lot of leadership. And I didn't ask anybody, but I bet there is lower crime.

So my own view is, I look around here and I think, if you believe that there is an even distribution of talent, intelligence, and ability in more or less every place, then we have to have more people who have the chance to go to Oxford and Georgetown, or Witwatersrand or wherever, and whatever it takes.

You made some very specific suggestions that I thought were good. I'll see what I can do to help get more American athletes and entertainers to come here and relate to all sectors of the society. We agree that the aid programs should be extended, that it should not be replaced by trade but instead supplemented for it. I will see what I can do to do some more leadership training initiatives. And I'll see what I can do with the business community. I'm going to dedicate a Ron Brown Commercial Center here today, and I'll alter my remarks a little bit to reflect the advice you just gave me.

But I just want to make the point that—I drive down these streets—I wanted to come to this neighborhood so badly, and I admire you all so much. But I can only say, when you get discouraged, just remember, nature abhors a vacuum. There is an equal distribution of intelligence, energy, leadership, and organizing ability. Bad things will happen when you don't have good leaders, good structures, and a good mission; good things will happen when you do.

And the government—Mr. Mandela, Mr. Mbeki—no one can be expected to run a free government of free people and organize every minute of every day. That's why the media is important in a free society. That's why all these NGO's are important. That's why the private sector is important.

And I don't mean to oversimplify this, but I just think that—we visited one of these microcredit projects in Uganda in a little village. The village is getting organized around village women borrowing small amounts of money, starting their businesses. They all of a sudden become leaders; they become role models. People see that life can be different than it is. We're now, with our aid programs, funding over $2 million of those loans a year around the world. If every government giving foreign aid had that kind of priority, you could literally revolutionize the economic structure of villages in developing countries on all continents.

So I want to encourage you. I'm just so impressed by what you said, but there is no simple answer. You've got to have more leaders, more structure, and the right mission. And we have to organize our aid program, our partnerships, everything else trying to sort of work toward that goal.

I'm sitting here listening to you talk and I just wish that there were—I don't know, however many it would take—200,000 just like you out there with the same background and training. But I hope you'll be encouraged. And I think that the real trick is going to be—what you said, I thought, was very important about after the freedom was achieved and after Mr. Mandela was elected and the victory, there must have been a lot of people who said, "I'm just tired of it; I just want to go back to my life." You want to quit the public space. But if you do, you create a vacuum before the structures are there that would get people in that are tired.

You know, in our country people get tired of politics. It's not particularly terrible. Twelve people go line up and run for office. You see what I mean? You'll get there. You'll reach a time when people can make—you'll have the luxuries of making these kind of choices. You don't have that luxury yet because you don't have the critical mass of organized life and a leadership funnel that will take care of all the children that are like those kids that are in the uniforms out there singing.

What were you going to say? I'm sorry.

[*A participant stressed the importance of learning from people such as the teachers and educators who have done extraordinary things under extremely difficult circumstances to rebuild civil society structures. Mrs. Clinton stressed the importance of finding specific areas that work, such as schools, microenterprises, or citizen participation institutions, and replicating them or creating that capacity in other communities and on a broader scale.*]

The President. That may be something that the government could do more of. For example, if you had, let's say, every week there would be on your television station a special on a health program, a housing program, an education program that's really working—what are the common elements, how were the leaders picked, how is it structured? And then you say, okay, we're going to fund our health, housing, and education programs. They don't have to be just like this one, because cultures are different, places are different, facts are different. But there are common elements; everyone has to meet that.

What I found, even in the United States—Hillary was kind about this. It drives me crazy. I consider it to be the major failure of my public life that every problem in our society today is being solved by somebody somewhere, and I can't get it to be replicated. So this is a generic problem of democracy, but it's one I think, since you're trying to catch up and you're trying to move in a hurry, in a funny way you might have less inbred resistance to this than we do.

Mrs. Clinton. Right. I agree with that.

The President. You could make it like an exciting thing.

Let me ask you the question in a different way, because we may be about to run out of time. Suppose you were the person—suppose the United States and every other country just sent you the money in our aid program—we just sent it to you. And it was all in one big pile, every country in the world giving aid to South Africa of any kind, and it went in your bank. You opened a bank account and you put it in, Chris, and you got to write a check, and the rest of you got to say how you would spend the aid money, all of it. What would you spend it on? How would you do it? Where would you start? If you had that kind of resource to start, how would you go about doing it? You might not want to answer the question now, but it's helpful to think about it in those terms.

[*A participant responded by praising the United States for providing funding for a conflict prevention center which would benefit the entire continent, and added that such sustainable aid to set up institutions that deal with violence and reconciliation, education, and technology would be the most significant contribution.*]

Q. Can I add one very quick ingredient to that? I think that one of the gravest dangers for this vibrant civil society, which is such an important guardian of democracy and vital for entrenching democracy in this society, is that the thrust towards an obligation to self-financing, in social work and education sectors in particular, runs the gravest risk of forcing those of us who have been entrenched at the grassroots level to focus away from our target constituencies in order to find the people who have

the money, because these are the people who don't—and that in some senses, that is the most important issue. For me in my public life, which I admit is somewhat less public than yours—[*laughter*]—my greatest frustration——

The President. Lucky you. [*Laughter*]

Q. ——my greatest frustration has been the point at which we believe we've got, in the 40 schools that we work in in Soweto, a pilot intervention that is unbelievably worthy of duplication. We don't have the means to do it, outside of a desperate attempt to lobby, beg, plead—and I'm glad Kumi got some money from the private sector, because I didn't. And it's the flip side of that coin.

And unless there is some sustainability in the areas of victim aid, in the areas of dealing with kids, constituencies that can't pay—if there isn't something in place which enables us to operate on the basis that we are sustainable and that we are secure, we don't have the creative space to do what you say.

The President. Well, it may be that what we're trying to do with our aid program and some of the signals we're going to send during and after this trip will help that a little bit. I hope it will.

I know we've got to go. I've got to ask one more question, though. For those of you who work with children in conflict resolution—and you're still dealing with the racial tensions with kids—do you ever talk to them about similar problems of people who look alike: the Irish problem, the Bosnian problem, the Middle Eastern problem?

Mrs. Clinton. The Rwanda problem?

The President. The Rwanda problem, although the Hutus and the Tutsis don't look alike to those who are sensitive. But still, you see what I'm—in Bosnia, the Croatians, the Serbs, and the Muslims are biologically indistinct; they are what they are by accident of political history over the centuries. And in the Middle East, the Arabs and the Jews are both Semitic people. And in Ireland, there are religious differences, but otherwise there is no difference, and they still fight over what happened 600 years ago.

So do you use this? I have a reason for asking the question, but tell me.

[*A participant described his work with a diverse group of South African young people, involving use of a play as a stimulus for discussions to bridge political and racial differences. He noted that the group had been successful in demonstrating tolerance and had visited Northern Ireland, Sarajevo, and Rwanda as well to spread its message.*]

The President. That's good.

[*A participant cited the Holocaust as another example of conflict and said that young people must be graphically shown that reconciliation is possible.*]

The President. What you said is really what I was thinking about because when I talk, when I go to Bosnia and I talk to those people, it's like their deal is the only deal in the world, their division. When I deal in the Middle East, and I talk to the Irish and I have to listen to it, every time I see the main players I deal with, I know I'm going to have to get History 101. [*Laughter*] It's like they've got a tape recorder, and I'm going to have to listen for 3 or 4 minutes before we can get down to business.

I don't say this in a critical way, but I think it's important for people to understand that everywhere in society, almost, there is like a battle of human nature that goes on, and there is a strong tendency to divide, whatever your world is, up between us and them. And you can't. People should never give up whatever their "us" is, you just want it be "us" and "we" instead of "us" and "them." So that's why I ask.

Thank you so much. Good luck to you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1 p.m. at R.P. Maphanzela Primary School.